

WALES PATAGONIA EXPEDITION

November - December 2013

Final Report by: Tom Ripley



Ollie Burrows and Phil Wessler on the Whillans Ramp at Dawn.

With support from: *British Mountaineering Council*
Mount Everest Foundation
Welsh Sport Association
Alpine Club Climbing Fund
Andrew Croft Memorial Fund

Introduction.

Patagonia has always been somewhere I have been interested in visiting. In recent years the weather has been much better than the normal awful. The chance to climb in Patagonia in good weather was too great to resist and Ollie Burrows and I flew down to Argentina at the start of November to see what it was all about.

The Climbing

We had planned to make to make a number of first ascents of rock routes on minor Patagonian summits. However we did not realise that November (the start of the climbing season in Patagonia) is much colder than December and January and far too cold for difficult rock climbing - or any climbing that requires bare hands.

We arrived in El Chalten, the small but the thriving community nestled beneath the Fitzroy and Torre mountains, exhausted after four eight hour flights, an unexpected overnight in Lima and a cramped bus journey. We met up with Phil Wessler, an American who we had met in Camp 4, who was down for the season. Phil informed us that a good weather window was forecast for the next two days. Despite being very tired a good weather in Patagonia is not to be ignored. The next day Ollie, Phil and I packed up and walked out of town. Seven hours later we reached Paso Superior, a popular bivouac spot beneath Fitzroy's North Face. Ollie and I settled down into our tiny tent, whilst Phil dug into a snowhole.

We woke early and Phil lead us across the glacier towards Ajuga Poincenot, a good navigational effort considering how dark it was. We reached the base of the route just before dawn and I took over the lead, leading across the bergschrund and up the Whillans Ramp, which was about scottish II/III. At the top of the ramp Phil lead two tricky mixed pitches, about Scottish IV 5, which lead to the ridge. Ollie lead us up the ridge, moving together. The climbing was straightforward with the occasional 4c boulder problem. Eventually we got to the summit and were greeted with spectacular views of Cerro Torre. We abseiled back down the route, jumped the shrund and arrived back at Paso superior. We packed up the rest of our gear and started walking back towards town. We crossed the snowline at Lago de los Tres just after nightfall. We continued walking back to town stopping to spend the night on a bench in a picnic shelter at 1am after twenty two hours on the go. The next morning we wandered back to town in the drizzle.

A few days later there was another small weather window. Ollie, Phil and I packed up and got a taxi to Rio Electrico. We walked up towards Piedra Negra, camping at a large boulder a few hundred metres below it. The next morning we woke early and walked to the base of the Amy-Vidailhet on Ajuga Guillaumet. I lead the initial couloir, which was straightforward apart from the long reach across the bergschrund. Phil then lead some rocky mixed terrain, which lead to the summit snow slopes. The summit itself was boulder problem, with great views of Fitzroy. After melting some water we descended the way we came.

The next few week were frustrating with constant poor weather. I walked in with Phil and a couple of Scottish climbers to try the Supercanaleta on Cerro Fitzroy, but turned round shortly before Paso del Cuadrado as it was snowing heavily. The next morning we kicked ourselves as we woke to the best day of weather on the whole trip.

Ten days later we had another shot at the Supercanaleta. We camped beneath the base the route and set off at 1 am. The weather was far from perfect and it was snowing slightly. The climbing in the initial colour was okay. My leg wasn't working properly. It felt dull and didn't have its' normal level of power. Ollie wasn't happy about the weather. So after several hundred metres we turned around. The next day we walked back to Chalten. By this point we were out of time. A couple of days later we packed up and headed back to the UK.

Notes.

Travel and General - We flew into Buenos Aires International airport and got a bus ride to the Internal airport, where we spent a very short nights sleeping on the floor. We the then flew with LAN Chile to El Calafate, via Ushuaia. Luggage allowance was one 23kg hold bag each plus a hand luggage bag. They didn't seemed too bothered by the size of the hand luggage bag and we employed the usual tricks like wearing big boots to take the maximum amount of stuff. We also purchased an additional 23kg hold bag, which cost roughly £50 each way.

When we arrived in El Calafate we got a bus with Las Lengas who are the only company who do buses direct from the airport to El Chalten. This is the quickest option as you do not have to go in Calafate itself, but the bus is small and very cramped and we ended up paying nearly the same as our tickets for excess baggage, despite only having one extra bag. It was more pleasant on our return journey as all buses going from Chalten to Calafate stop at Calafate airport so we were able to get a more comfortable 'proper' coach and didn't have to pay for extra luggage.

Accommodation - There are a wide variety of places to stay in El Chalten, to suit all budgets. We stayed at camping Del Lago, which is very popular with climber and very busy. It has hot showers, cable TV, a box full of films, free wifi and a basic kitchen. We managed to negotiate a good rate for our extended stay, which worked out at about £2.50 per person per night.

Food - There a number of supermarkets in Chalten that sell a variety of basic food. Food prices aren't particularly cheap, roughly comparable with food in the UK. Except for good quality steak which we found so cheap that it was unjustifiable to eat anything else. Freeze dried meals and gels aren't available in El Chalten, so if you like to eat that sort of thing whilst on the hill bring your own.

Cooking and Gas - Whilst in town we used the gas hobs and crockery in our campsite. On the hill we used an MSR Reactor, which we found to be excellent. Canister gas is readily available in El Chalten.

Gear Shops - Import duty is very high in Argentina, which makes climbing gear in El Chalten very expensive. There are a number of shops with a modest selection at prices roughly fifty percent higher than those in the UK. I'd take everything you need out with you, but it is reassuring to know if you drop or break anything.

Equipment

A few thoughts on we took, stuff that worked and stuff that didn't.

Rucksacks. We took 40 litre lightweight climbing bags. In retrospect this probably a mistake. The walk ins in Patagonia are huge. Climbers effectively walk into advance camps like Paso Superior with camping gear and then make lightweight summit pushes carrying minimal equipment. With this in mind I would probably take a comfy 60litre expedition sack for the walk ins and inside it a much smaller 25-30 litre sack for the routes.

Tent - We used a single skin BD Firstlight tent to camp beneath the routes.

Sleeping - Here we made another mistake. We took very lightweight (250g fill weight) down sleeping bags and 1/2 length karimatts, intending on carrying up the routes. The weather windows in Patagonia are rarely long enough to bivi mid route, so you want go light and move fast. We should have taken warmer bags (500g fill weight) and comfy thermarests, this would have given us a better nights sleeps before the routes.

Clothing - Rab generously supplied us with clothing to wear in Patagonia. It's a little bit colder and much winder than the Alps in summer. We wore thermals, fleece tights and hoodies, softshell trousers and lightweight shell jacket, with a mid weight belay jacket in the bag.

Boots - We both wore Scarpa Phantom Guides, which we found to very warm, comfy and lightweight. I wouldn't risk using lighter boots early in the season, but would consider it later on, when conditions are warmer and more suitable for rock climbing.

Climbing Hardware - Take a wide variety of equipment with you to El Chalten. Most big routes require a double sets of cams, some ice screws, a set of wires and a few pegs. It is a good idea take plenty of abseil tat, old krabs and wires to abandon when descending routes.

Ropes - We took skinny half ropes and a skinny single rope, working on the theory we have a spare if one got chopped. It is possible to buy ropes in El Chalten (but they are a fair bit more expensive than the UK). Knowing this I'd probably only take two ropes in future.

Satellite Phone - We didn't take one but would seriously consider taking one if we were going again. That way you could get someone in the UK to text you updated forecasts whilst at the base of the route. It would also mean that a rescue could be coordinated much quicker if you were in a remote location like the base of Fitzroy's Super Cannalata.

Books - Patagonia Vertical by Rolando Garabotti is well worth the hefty price tag. We photo copied and laminated several topos of routes we were interested in.

Budget

Expenditure		Income	
International Flights	£1800	British Mountaineering Council	£800
Internal Flights	£800	Mount Everest Foundation	£1000
Transfers and Taxis	£150	Welsh Sport Association	£3000
Hostel in BA	£80	Andrew Croft Memorial Fund	£400
In country costs	£1500	Alpine Club Climbing Fund	£200
Excess Baggage	£400	Total	£5400
Hill food	£210	Personal Contributions (each)	£1076.85
Insurance	£477		
Equipment	£1450		
TOTAL	£6867		
10% Contingency	£686.70		
GRAND TOTAL	£7553.70		

Support, Sponsorship and Thanks.

Financial Support: A massive thank you to the following organizations, without their support the expedition would not have taken place.

<i>British Mountaineering Council</i>	£800
<i>Mount Everest Foundation</i>	£1000
<i>Welsh Sport Association</i>	£3000
<i>Andrew Croft Memorial Fund</i>	£400
<i>Alpine Club Climbing Fund</i>	£200

We're really grateful to the following companies who supplied us with equipment.

RAB
Beta Climbing Designs
Teko
Inov8
Totem
MSR
Needle Sports
Aiguille Alpine

Thanks

Bob Brewer and Pete Graham for the MEF references

Colin Haley, Jens Holsten and James Monypenny for general advice on climbing in Patagonia.

Oh and Phil Wessler for climbing with us...

And Finally.

If you are planning a trip to the Patagonia and need any information drop me a line and I'll do my best to help. Tom Ripley: thesavoygrill@hotmail.co.uk